Interview with Charles S. Whitehouse

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

AMBASSADOR CHARLES S. WHITEHOUSE

Interviewed by: Roger Ernst

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WHITEHOUSE: The jobs Foreign Service officers had in CORDS, Vietnam, were really very unusual. I had about 1800 people working for me in the part of Vietnam called 3 Corps, which was the nine provinces surrounding Saigon. There were teams in every province and sub-teams in the districts which made up the provinces. Very often there would be a senior Foreign Service Officer, a Class-2 or 3 officer, in-charge or a colonel, or lieutenant colonel, as his deputy or vice versa. I worked for the three-star general who was the commander. He had a major-general as one deputy and me as the other. Our teams were going into the villages on intelligence, on refugees or police matters, on agriculture, on building roads and bridges, etc. These were very, very exciting management jobs. We were working in an atmosphere of constant crisis, but we had a remarkable degree of harmony between the military and the civilians. The best man in this field was Jean Paul Vann, who I succeeded in 3 Corps, Neil Sheehan has written a book called “Bright Shining Lie” about his life. I think all Foreign Service Officers who worked in CORDS, got a lot out of the experience because it was so much more challenging than working in an embassy anywhere in the world.

Q: Do you see some current or future applications of this type of inter-service interdisciplinary coordination now applying in a more peaceful world where the coordination between diverse conflicting political and economic interests is important.

WHITEHOUSE: I do. I think for example if you take Peru or Colombia, I think you could make a very persuasive case that the classic American structure of an American Embassy is not appropriate to the kinds of problems we confront there today. You have a major cocaine-growing problem there in the Upper Huallaga Valley and a very savage insurgency run by the Shining Path guerillas. I think that there should be a far more integrated up country operation than we have today. The classic elements can do their traditional work but at the same time you've got to have dynamic leadership given to activities that are up country and to the mechanics, the military trainers, narcotic agents, AID people, peace corps who work there. All of this has to be pulled together and treated as one effort. You can't have narcotic agents go off in their corner and do their thing, the military trainers go off in their corner and do their thing. It has to be, in my view, centralized and centrally directed and centrally supported. Your communications support, your food, your medical support and air support is all harmonized and centrally directed and shared among the interested agencies.

Q: I can see what you're saying.

WHITEHOUSE: It all has to be an integrated team effort and that is what we finally learned in Indochina. We did it differently in Vietnam than we did it Laos. But then in Laos you had an extraordinarily close-knit country team. The CIA station chief, AID director, and the senior military officer and I went around like an eight legged animal. We were in touch with each other every day, all day long. We had staff meetings every day and we all recognized that what one person did instantly influenced the programs of the others - there was no such thing as independent action.

Q: You didn't feel the separatism that existed and still exists I guess in the agencies in Washington. The field was unified or had the opportunity to have a common view and then could get its act together.

WHITEHOUSE: The lines to the field in Indochina had become so complicated because of the financing and the management arrangements that there was nobody in Washington who could keep it straight at all. Therefore we had a lot more autonomy in the field than people would have today.

In Laos, for example, there were two young men in Washington who were our desk officers. They didn't have a clue about the petroleum procurement problems that we faced, in 1974 and this office had all our activities. The AID people understood their programs and what they were funding and financing, but were only dimly aware of the degree to which military aircraft or military supported programs were in fact being used to support the refugee programs up country. You cannot have bookkeepers who will be able to say, this airplane is going up to landing site 219 and it's carrying bullets but it's going to come back with six refugee families and therefore the price per agency is so minor. You can't get into all that. We're one country and one government and I think we did remarkably well in Indochina in overcoming that kind of nonsense.

Q: I have to interject. I can hear Ambassador Bunker for whom I have the highest respect, saying to me, "Roger, what you need to think about is what is the national interest, not that of your agency. If we get the national interest right, your agency will be taken care of." You'll do the right thing. You're saying the same thing.

WHITEHOUSE: Yes, Ambassador Bunker felt very strongly that there was a clear national interest and this sort of interdepartmental nonsense was something that just got in the way. In Indochina the programs were vast, the amount of money being spent was huge, but the amount of authority given to field was happily sufficient so as not to have to push questions back and forth to Washington all of the time. Under my predecessors, Bill

Sullivan and Mac Godley—very, very good, arrangements had been made. I don't think I broke any new ground. I kept interdepartmental relationships that had been created before and in which everybody was very, very comfortable. It required, and I say this in all modesty, a good deal of personal leadership and vigor on the part of the ambassador to keep the lions on their perches and to keep them from scratching one another sometimes, but we had a very, very good group in Laos as we did in Vietnam. There are always situations in very large enterprises in which people do get a little cranky with each other, but in Laos, we really didn't.

Q: I really saw your approach in Bangkok, in Thailand. The country team was a very much unified operation, and I don't want to say, whoa to the person who fouled the nest and got out of step, but everyone knew in fact, that there was one representative of the president, that was yourself, and we all had to carry a national responsibility.

WHITEHOUSE: I think there is such a thing as operating style. I think it is important to deal right off the top of the deck with everybody and not take the AID mission director off in one corner and whisper something in his ear and then have a separate conversation that might be a little different with the CIA station chief, and saying something different with the senior military officer. I'm a great believer in staff meetings and everybody hearing what the other fellow has been told and having a chance to get his nickel in. I think that was one of the great flaws of Graham Martin, the man who succeeded Bunker in Vietnam. He was a great fellow for conspiratorial type relationships. He would say something to one fellow, and then to somebody else, and then don't tell so and so that I told you this. You create an immense web of complications operating that way, so I'm dead set against that.

Q: I've seen how you have used this same principle in all of your assignments. Not to omit other important points, your most recent appointment was in the Defense Department. Were you on loan from the State Department?

WHITEHOUSE: No, I'd long since retired.

Q: You'd retired and then were called back to serve in the little State Department within the Defense Department, which I was a member before it was even set up in 1950.

WHITEHOUSE: No, the job I had was not in ISA. The job that I had was created by Congress when they passed the Goldwater-Nichols Act, believing that the Pentagon was not paying nearly enough attention to minor aspects of warfare such as terrorism, and counter terrorism and insurgencies, and that the military establishment was obsessed with the big tank battle that might be fought in Europe or a replay of the battle of Midway that would be fought with aircraft carriers out in the Pacific. We had shown extraordinary ineptitude in operations like the rescue of the hostages in Iran. Every one of the small operations that we had tried to run since the Vietnam War starting with “Mayaguez,” where a ship was seized by the Cambodians, and 19 marines were killed in a very clumsily conceived effort to rescue the ship. The Pentagon job went unfilled for months and the military and civilian leadership was opposed to it feeling that Congress was interfering in the management of the defense establishment. Then Frank Carlucci succeeded Weinberger as Secretary of Defense. Frank and I had been Congo desk officers during the Congo crisis in the early sixties. He knew I had all of this experience working in Indochina and asked if I would take this on, which I did with great pleasure.

Q: So you were never in ISA?

WHITEHOUSE: No. This was separate, but Rich Armitage was in ISA and we worked very closely together because of the links with the military assistance program, the foreign training effort and the general political orientation of what we were trying to do. Q: You were able to pull forward into your last assignment much of what you had learned and experienced in each of your posts.

WHITEHOUSE: I had no experience in the special operations field. I've never jumped out of an airplane in a camouflage suit in my life but I have a great deal of experience in the insurgency, pacification kind of world. And a great deal of experience working intimately

with military men. There were still a good many around the Pentagon that knew me from the old days although I am so old that they were captains while I was in Indochina.

Today, with the changes taken place in eastern Europe, this whole area of terrorism is changing, but having forces who are able to cope with unusual circumstances is something we must maintain. I can see reasons for this that have nothing to do with the Cold War, or relations between the Great Powers. The armed services and AID and USIA have got to give some thought to the questions that emerge when we begin to assist a country against guerillas and insurgents, as in El Salvador. These are very different problems and the classic military approach is of course no good at all. One has to be so careful in the application of military force in conflicts of this sort. What the military call collateral damage is the kind of thing that can really alienate and embitter the population. You can't go around with tanks and trucks, breaking up a lot of things and damaging crops in that kind of warfare. It takes a different mind-set. It's not like the French would say, La guerre l'ontrance, war to the end. It's all highly political and very psychological. It's a different perception of the uses of military power.

You have to harmonize military power and economic assistance and information and psychological pressure on a difficult situation. One is not good without the other.

Q: Both of the major superpowers have stubbed their toes certainly in recent years. Certainly the Russians have had a hard time in Afghanistan, Angola, to some extent Cuba, Vietnam, Ethiopia and we've had difficulty in our list of countries where we've been involved in an internal struggle.

What kind of a role do you see for the foreign service officers then. You've had a big and creative role which drew heavily on your own background, but in terms of the women and the men in the service in 1990 or 92 or 95. Are there roles for the foreign service in that context?Can you look forward to the next few years? Do we need special training?

WHITEHOUSE: I get discouraged about the future of the service. I think some of the problems the service faces are self generated.

Q: I'm disturbed to hear you say you have anxieties about the future of the service. Here you are second generation officer. You have a daughter who might end up in the service. She's in international affairs.

WHITEHOUSE: I have a nephew in now.

I think increasing politicization is a problem as we all know. I think the levels to which political people are being brought in both in Washington and abroad, is disheartening. In the service itself, I have been shocked for some years by the degree to which there is the me-generation approach among some of the officers. I remember when I was the president of AFSA, a friend in the personnel business brought to my attention that the three most sought after posts in the service were DCM-Dublin, Consul General-Cape Town, and DCM-Malta. You know, those are not the kinds of jobs that are going to put hair on your chest. It's a challenging world out there with all kinds of difficulties and to have people looking for those cushy assignments where you improve your back swing or your back hand are not going to give you a response to that kind of challenge. It's very disappointing. I'm told they're having a hard time filling positions in difficult and turbulent posts—like Salvador, like Peru, like Colombia. I can see with terrorists and the risks, people don't want to go. I think the whole question of the married officer with a wife who has her own career is extremely difficult.

The foreign service mirrors our society and all the problems that are inherent in our society. The old service of my father's time was sturdy, but much too clubby and elitist, unashamedly elitist about some things. They were not generally representative of America but the best of the young men and women we had. Today we may not wind up with the right mix in terms of dispersion and the right ratio between men and women, but we do the best we can. I think people should have rights to a united degree but I was stunned the

other day to see that a person who was blind had won a lawsuit permitting him to get into the Foreign Service. The Service is not just like working in a bank. I think it causes a lot of problems for our country to go overboard on the subject of individual rights in a singularly demanding Service.

Q: You might have a view on a matter that has been kicked around for quite a number of years. The full integration of the services, the children of other agencies, the AID, the USIA group, Commerce, Treasury, Agriculture, to name three others, as attach#s. Is that one way to get this push you're referring to or is there a deeper problem you're suggesting.

WHITEHOUSE: I think the skills that are required are different. Take Treasury. It was my experience that the Treasury attach#s were highly intelligent, very capable, highly respected by the local governments in the countries to which they were sent. They did an extraordinarily good job. But they were finance people, economists. For most countries a journeyman economist is certainly sufficient. You don't have to be an economic expert to understand the ills of most countries in the third world. I think there are management skills that are different in AID and USIA, and Commerce and Treasury. The crunch comes at the DCM level, when people in the other branches of the Foreign Service family can say, let me go out into the interagency sunlight and position myself to become an ambassador, and why the hell shouldn't I be considered for DCM. Why do those foreign service officers hog those positions. There is no easy solution to this perception.

Q: You mention politicization of the service. Do you see any handy remedies. We've got great examples of men and women who came in through the political door, served this country beautifully and will continue to do so. But do you see an answer to that.

WHITEHOUSE: I think there have been many proofs - what with Bunker, Bruce and many others bringing to their posts the prestige acquired in business or industry or banking, and many personal skills. Many of them were great. But it's different if you are going to bring in a used car salesman from California and send him to some country in Africa, so he can get

some sense of social fulfillment. I think you ought to get a lot tougher, I mean the President and the Secretary, should be a lot tougher about not sending silly people to posts which Foreign Service personnel could fill very, very well. It just cuts the guts out of the Service if interesting jobs to which you could aspire, are given to unqualified political appointees.

I think there has been a suspicion at the White House about the Service. People have thought that the Service was disloyal. It is important to recall that there was a great difference between the political views of the Nixon Administration and the Carter Administration and then the Reagan Administration. You had a real revolution each time and it is understandable that the Carter people said to themselves, huh, all these people under Kissinger are untrustworthy, they're not sympathetic to the poor and the downtrodden and are obsessed with the Cold War. And then four years later, the Reagan crowd comes in and says, look at these ninnies that have been working for Carter. They're obsessed with human rights and nonsense like that. They don't understand what a threat the evil empire is. Well, they were both talking about the same cadre of Foreign Service Officers. The Service gets very battered when the basic perceptions of the administration are as profoundly different as they have been recently.

Q: You and I came into the service, I guess, during a period in which bi-partisanship, or non- partisanship was a highly prized value. I wonder if this is the point in which we ought to consider the role of Congress, not just the CODELs that descend on us overseas, but the Congress and the consent to ambassadorial appointments on the one hand and policy and then joining with the White House overly, in some cases, too much action, too many foreign policies in the House of Representatives. Do you have any ideas what the legislative process can do to strengthen our foreign policy activities.

WHITEHOUSE: Well, I am very gloomy about that. The loss of party discipline, the factioning of authority within the Congress itself. Every Senator acts as though he were the Secretary of State. When I first went to work for the Department, the secretaries would call

up congressional leaders, reach agreement with them on something, and they could make the decision stick. Now they can't.

Also, there weren't so many staffers. There are as many staffers on the Hill as there are functionaires in the Pentagon. The staffs of individual senators and congressmen have grown enormously, and then there's been this proliferation of committees and subcommittees. Each have a majority staff and a minority staff. All of these young people are dynamically trying to prove why they are important. They're writing letters and putting them under the noses of their congressman, or senator, or committee chairman or member to harass the executive branch. I know Secretary Cheney for example, has been, objecting to the enormous number of requests for information that the Pentagon gets from the Congress. Literally thousands of letters, thousands of reports requested. Do you think anybody reads those reports? Of course not. It's just some staffer trying to make himself important. Have a report written. Hearings can be held and you can ask some questions. Some of them are fishing expeditions. I don't know how the congressional authority which is being manifested today is going to be reduced. I understand how it was produced. It's a product of Vietnam, of Watergate, of new methods of electioneering by politicians who are no longer dependent on their part but have decided to run and not be indebted to the national party or national leadership. All of this has come together to create an extremely chaotic situation. Extremely chaotic.

I think this whole question of reducing our defense expenditures is going to be a nightmare politically. We've seen this year, unwanted fighter planes being put in the budget so as to keep plants (F-14s) on Long Island alive. This whole interrelationship between Congress, the defense, industrial world and the services is extremely complex. We're faced with an entirely new situation. It is going to be very hard to have tough decisions made in this undisciplined environment.

Q: And equally hard for an ambassador and his staff to explain what is the American position on a related subject, Japan or Uruguay, and African country, the Middle East. This

may be a point at which of the role that you see played in your experience by the USIA offices and their fields and the media. Both in explaining America and in complicating life.

WHITEHOUSE: Trying to explain American positions overseas is very, very difficult because they are often contradictory, often illogical. What the executive branch says it believes is instantly denied by one or more significant congressional figures. The media have their own view on things. The disciplined structure of the policy world we grew up in really has evaporated. I think it is a very dog-eat-dog and complex world out there.

I thought George Shultz described it very well at the Iran-Gate hearings. How difficult it was as Secretary of State to get a national position on something and have it stick. I've forgotten his joke, nothing stayed stuck more than about 24 hours. And I think he was right. You get something decided and it evaporates on you.

We're coming into an era in which diplomacy and the effective use of American influence, and we still have influence in the world, is more than ever going to be important. We're coming out of the Cold War trenches, facing very diverse and new problems, and it will be very fascinating for the men and women who are involved to grapple with them, but my heart goes out to them because I think the playing field in which to sort thing out is terribly uneven with this chaotic congressional picture and the extraordinary influence of the media, particularly television with its simplistic approach to complicated situations.

Q; Do you see an increase or decrease in the recourse by administrations to special emissaries? We've seen case after case in the last few years where something pops up and an individual is hauled in to the Secretary's office and then the White House and clothed with ambassadorial rank and sent to capitals A, B, and C. It must have a bad effect on the authority with which the ambassador of that country speaks for America, in just trying to elucidate just what the American view is, if all of a sudden there is a special emissary to explain. Do you see any change in that?

WHITEHOUSE: I don't think that there have been any more emissaries than there have been in other eras. Look at Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Hopkins, Colonel House and Woodrow Wilson. I think foreign governments rather appreciate having the fellow that knows the most about a problem, appear on the scene and explain it. I think this is particularly so in trade and economic problems, where the Embassy is relatively well informed but might not have the same feel for the politics of a textile fight, or an airline landing rights fight, than the guy from Washington who is trying to placate the industry, the interested congressmen, the unions and everybody that's interested in what ever the thing might be. I think that foreigners often appreciate a fellow who comes and really knows what he's talking about. I don't think an ambassador should get his back up and think that he is losing his status because someone comes out to explain why we are going to do something.

Q: We're also seeing a new growth of regionalism with which America has to deal. In the same sense that we are a collection of fifty states, and foreign countries have to deal with us, we are now on the eve of having the Asian Pacific equivalent of the OECD. I say on the eve, but it may be two or three years away, but it is growing out of ASEAN. We have representation in the Common Market. We have Europe '92 emerging with in some areas a given set of common ground rules superceding the national sovereignties. How do you see that as a challenge for the foreign service and how the department as the senior agency responsible for foreign affairs can respond and carry America's word.

WHITEHOUSE: I think major restructuring, bureaucratic restructuring, is going to be required in the State Department. What sense does it make today, to have Western European and Eastern European affairs handled separately? How to structure ourselves to be effective and responsive and understand what's going on is going to be difficult.

Q: Country desks are still going to have to handle US citizens that get locked up. These are consular questions.

WHITEHOUSE: And bilateral questions. There are always going to be bilateral questions. There are a lot of economic and trade questions that have emerged at this point. Some can be handled regionally but bilateral relations are still basic.

Q: Economic, disarmament, arms controls, telecommunications, environmental issues the trans border problems, just with Canada, for example, and certainly in Western Europe and now in Eastern Europe. You have a whole new bureaucratic structure to deal with that doesn't define itself as Fauquier County versus Prince William-Fairfax. It goes across the lines.

WHITEHOUSE: It does. And then the interested domestic agencies recognizing that these are international problems, want to have their people abroad, dealing with the foreign agencies that are worrying about these issues. That changes the complexion of the old family of agencies that used to have people abroad. I think these new agencies are quite right. They have to get their people out to the embassies where they can work directly with the foreigners involved.

As you say, telecommunications, acid rain, AIDS, medical problems. It's mind boggling how much into each other's affairs we all are these days.

Q: That would suggest new roles for the foreign service, for the permanent cadre. To know enough about the special interest to be able to orchestrate, bring forward the special talents, introduce them, get them set up to do business on environmental, drugs, or crime, special issues.

WHITEHOUSE: I agree. And there's more to that than just having an administrative cadre that provides communications, vehicles, air-conditioned and secure housing, for representatives of various government agencies. There really is a role for a generalist type of foreign service officer who is knowledgeable enough about acid rain or airline issues to hold the fort and call in the experts as needed, and to explain what the hang-ups are in

that particular country or the characteristics of the individuals with whom they are dealing. One of the things that is short sighted is the sense that an all powerful Washington bureaucracy can send out emissaries that are going to do things without much reference to the field people. I think the field people, having been one most of my life, really are essential in terms of understanding the foreigners at their posts. What you can say to one person and what you can't say to another. To use your charm and knowledge of these individuals to make things easy for the people who have a specialized role to play.

Q: I was talking to a colleague the other day who was mentioning this same subject. He said the prime example of two countries that have talked past each other, is the US and Japan. We're not really dealing with the things that irritate them about our behavior and vice versa. I guess you can fault the professionals for not being able to dominate the dialogue.

WHITEHOUSE: But they can't dominate the dialogue when it is so all encompassing. Enormously powerful corporations, are deeply involved; Japanese corporations in American life and American corporations struggling to become a part of Japanese economic life. The perceptions that everybody has about what the other fellow is doing are being made by the television people, to a very great extent. People read newspapers less than they used to. Television has an enormous influence. So I think it is not conceivable that the professionals in the embassy in Tokyo can so dominate the play in center court, that you are not going to have a lot of chaos all around the stadium.

Q: This has been a very far reaching review of a 40-50 year span of history. Are there some highlights that you might think of. Some great moments you look back upon and say, well that was well done, Charlie. From which you take great pleasure or some great disappointments in your career that you would like to share.

WHITEHOUSE: There are certainly not disappointments. I have been fortunate in having had extremely interesting and challenging assignments. I recognized that the real

challenge of our time was in these turbulent, sometimes dangerous posts in Africa and Indochina. I found great happiness and great fulfillment in working there. Starting with Conakry, Guinea, which was extraordinarily difficult under the dictatorship of Sekou Toure, where we, the American community, were hostages for a period of several months which nobody knows. There were no American newspapers or television, and the Department didn't want to get the media excited and assumed that it would resolve itself. We went through extremely difficult times there. As I mentioned earlier, my two assignments to Vietnam, the first one with CORDS, the pacification program, subsequently as Bunker's deputy was extraordinarily interesting. I also really loved my years in Laos. You remember Charlie Mann, the AID director there. A wonderful fellow. I stay in touch with many of the men from that period. You and I worked together in Bangkok, trying to get our country's position in Southeast Asia realigned in the aftermath of the collapse of our power position in Indochina. It was difficult but I think we pulled it off. Having maintained the programs we felt were needed in that part of the world and I am proud of the way we worked out those problems.

Q: I agree they were not. But they were the things that were such a great pleasure to work on. Because they weren't easy. We had wonderful people to work with on the other side of the table. WHITEHOUSE: I think we had gone through a rocky patch and the Thai wished us well, and did not hurl themselves into the warm embrace of the communists in Hanoi by any means.

Q: Anything else to share?

WHITEHOUSE: No I don't think so.

Q: You can of course, add anything you want later when you review the transcripts.

WHITEHOUSE: I listened to the subject of foreign affairs as a child, spent my adult life in this diplomatic world, and later was president of the AFSA, I feel that there is real entity called the Foreign Service of the United States of America. People ought to be proud

to belong to it, and feel close to other members of that knighthood or fraternity. There has been in recent years, competition for assignments, and a lot of time worrying about administrative matters. Should the government pay to ship the cage of so and so's canary from one post to another? Those are not serious issues. I would hope that the result of all your effort, people listening to these tapes and hearing what my friends and colleagues say about the Service will get a sense of the vast fellowship which has existed for a very long time. My father went into the Service in 1905. So within my family we are coming to almost a century of first hand experience in it. I know he felt very strongly in the ties that he had with Jimmy Dunn, and Norman Armour who were his contemporaries as I do about Habib and Sullivan, Godley and the list you have. We share something special. Of course we complained about the “injustices that were perpetrated on us by an unthinking bureaucracy at home,” but we were nevertheless thrilled to be doing what we were doing, and complaining was just part of the game. We felt then, and I hope people will continue to feel that if they do their job conscientiously, that things will even out in the end. There doesn't have to be scrambling for advantage in every assignment, or doing things every minute that are career enhancing. I think virtue is rewarded. I think people did the best they could and they did have satisfying careers in the Foreign Service. There were rocky patches but they passed. The assignments that seemed to me to be the ones that were the most desperate, the most unappealing, were the ones that turned out to be the most stimulating, and most rewarding, and in many cases, the most career enhancing. Because you got a chance to show what you could do, under conditions of great difficulty and danger. So that I think it is a mistake to micro manage a career too much and to worry about whether something is career enhancing. Providence takes care of people. I'm proud to have been in the service and hope today's officers will feel the same way.

Q: Thank you very much.

End of interview